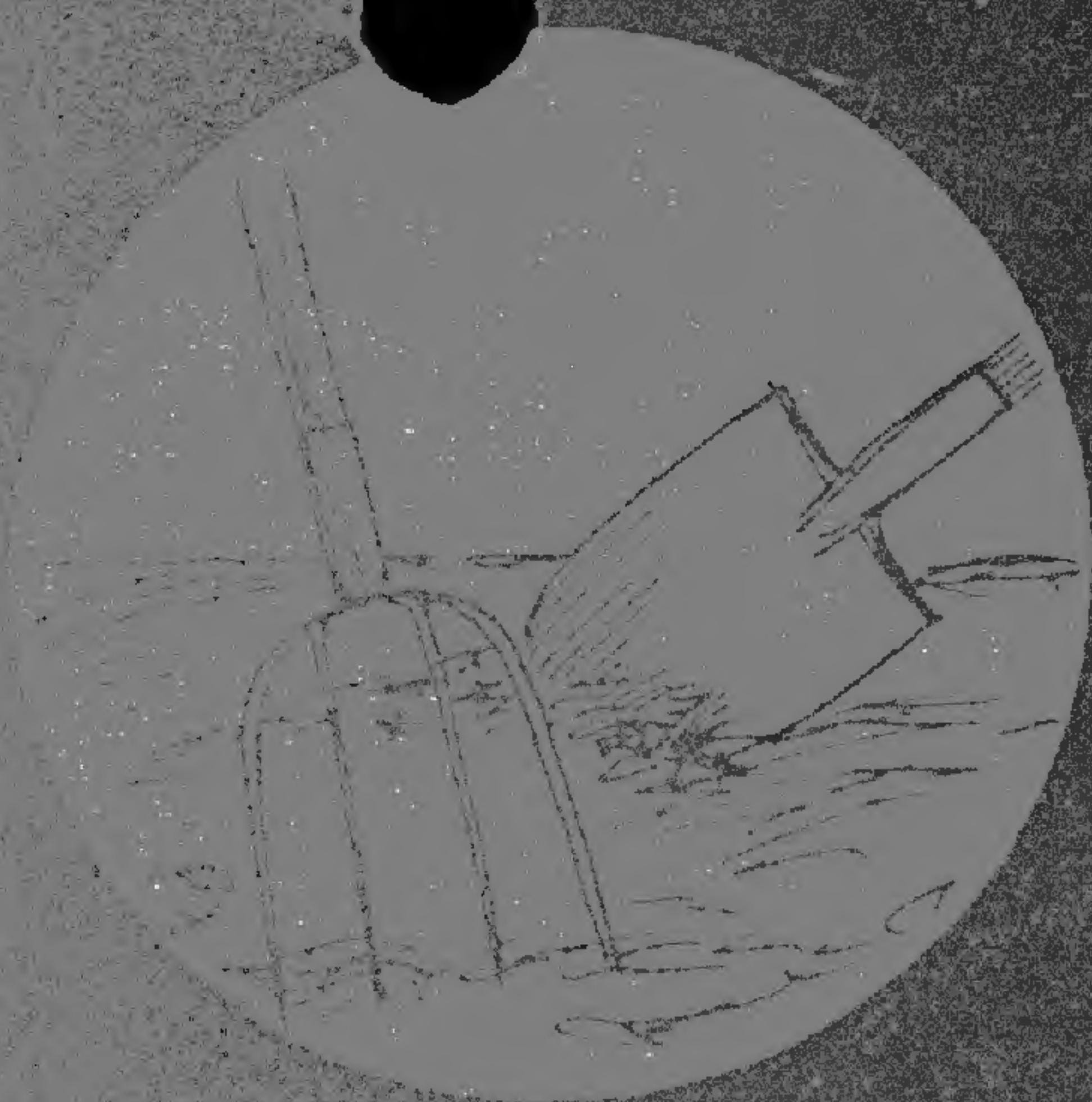


horticulture

for the home gardener



Number 3

Composting

Each day in Southern California thousands of pounds of garden trash are discarded which could be converted into valuable garden soil amendments. This so-called garden trash will, when properly composted and used, improve sandy as well as clay soils to the extent that soil erosion will be easier. Compost added to a light sandy soil will improve its water and nutrient holding capabilities; when added to heavy clay soil it will loosen the soil so it can be worked more easily and drainage will be improved.

Making compost in your own garden is simply doing what Mother Nature has been doing since plant life began on this planet. In native forests and meadows, there is a never-ending cycle of plant material that die, decay, and go back into the soil as humus. Leafmold and peatmoss are two forms of nature's compost that most gardeners are familiar with.

Compost is very easy and inexpensive to make yourself. Compost holding bins can be as simple and inexpensive or as elaborate as you want. All will produce the same valuable compost. (See illustrations on other side.) The only requirement is that air must be allowed to get into the compost pile in order for it to decompose thoroughly.

After the bin is completed, the organic material to be composted can be added. If it is available, manure is a good material to use as a base for the compost pile. Usually a one- or two-inch-deep layer is sufficient. On top of that should go the garden trash. Leaves (dry or green), grass clippings, weeds, trimmings off the bushes and trees are all good materials to use. Big leaves, twigs, and branches will compost very slowly unless they are first ground up by a shredder or rotary mower. Other materials that will make good compost are potato peelings and other scraps of vegetables from the kitchen. By mixing equal parts of green material (leaves, grass clippings, and weeds) with dried materials such as wood chips, dried leaves, and straw, the correct carbon to nitrogen ratio can be achieved for easy decomposition. One- or two-inch layers of garden trash should alternate with one or two inch layers of garden soil until the pile reaches a height of four to five feet. The pile should be formed so there is a slight depression in the center to catch water since moisture is necessary to keep the pile actively decomposing.

After the compost pile is made, it should be turned over so that all the material is thoroughly mixed together and allowed to stand for a week. During this time it is important to check and see if heat is being generated at the center of the pile. If decomposition is taking place, it should reach a temperature of about 160 degrees F. and steam may occasionally be given off as the pile is turned. Failure to heat up is usually due to low nitrogen in the pile. If your pile does not heat up, you can mix in about 2 cups of a high-nitrogen fertilizer, such as ammonium sulfate, to every 25 cubic feet of compost. Another reason for the lack of heat is that the compost pile can be too dry. If it is dry, add just enough water to make the pile slightly moist. Too much water will drown the decomposing action.

The heating action of the pile will start to slow down about two weeks after the initial turning. The greatest composting action will be evident near the center bottom of the pile and it will be necessary to turn the pile over every three to five days to get the outer edges mixed in nearer the center. Heating action will kill most weed seeds and disease-producing organisms that might

(over)

have found their way into the pile. Should the compost pile get too hot, most of the beneficial organisms could be destroyed, thus the purpose for the frequent turning.

A month after the initial turning of the pile it will be greatly reduced in size and will or should have changed into a dark, crumbly material now ready to use. Some people prefer to screen the compost through a 1/2-to 3/4-inch mesh screen, returning any material that won't pass through these holes back into the next compost pile for further decomposition.

In Southern California, composting can be done on a year-round basis. It is improbable that garden soils, heavy or light, can have too much organic matter... added to them. Each time a new bed is prepared for planting, several inches of compost will help to improve the soil and the growth of plants.

Additional information can be obtained at:
Los Angeles State and County Arboretum - 681-5277,
Descanso Gardens - 790-5571,
South Coast Botanic Garden - 772-5813.

